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Texts in Context

Confessing Jesus as Lord: Selected Epistles (Epiphany to Palm Sunday)

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A THREAD THAT CONNECTS A GOOD PORTION OF THE PAULINE TEXTS IN THE lectionary for Epiphany, Lent, and Holy Week is the theme of confessing Jesus as Lord. In order to emphasize this motif, I will begin with the text designated for Palm Sunday (Phil 2:5-11) and work my way backwards through Lent (Philippians 3-4) to Epiphany (1 Corinthians 12-13). While it may be somewhat awkward, this “backwards progression” has a theological point: our confession of Jesus as Lord in the present moment is an anticipation of what the future holds for the world. Paradoxically, Christian theology begins at the end.

Palm Sunday: Philippians 2:5-11—Beginning at the end

Confessing has come a long way since Paul’s day. For some people, confession conjures up the image of relentless police detectives eager for an admission of guilt, badgering or cajoling the suspect sitting in “the box.” For others, confession is linked with the church’s practice of penance and the forgiveness of sins. The way Paul uses the term in Phil 2:11, however, is quite removed from situations in which individual persons acknowledge their guilt. Confessing is first and foremost a *theological* activity. What I hope to show is that Paul’s understanding of the identity of God is at stake in the notion of confession.

For Paul, confession is a deep and unforced agreement about the truth of all reality. The focus in Pauline confession is not on the individual and his or her

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actions but on the whole of reality and the way it holds together. Paul's understanding of confession is apparent in the second half of the Christ hymn, verses 9-11: "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The Greek word that stands behind "confess" in verse 11 is ἐξομολογέομαι. At the heart of the term is λόγος, and this of course stresses the speaking idea. The prefix ὁμο which means "same" calls attention to agreement in speech. Paul has a vision of the end time in which all of creation is united in its unforced agreement that Jesus is Lord.

Yet there is even more going on here than a unified creation. With whom will all tongues agree that Jesus is Lord? The vast majority of interpreters have been satisfied with the answer: "with one another." While correct as far as it goes, this reading does not capture Paul's radical point. Before it is with one another, the deep agreement of all tongues is with God. In verse 9, Paul portrays God as the first to confess that Jesus is Lord. When God "gave him the name that is above every name," God is already naming Jesus Lord. God is doing first what all creation will someday do.

If this is the case, consider what this naming of Jesus as Lord means for God. In response to the action of Christ Jesus narrated in 2:6-8, God makes a claim about the truth of reality: Jesus is Lord. In God's exaltation of Jesus, God transfers God's own name to the Crucified One. Thus, the resurrection or exaltation of Jesus is not merely a matter of God's redressing the human injustice shown in the killing of Jesus, vindicating the innocent sufferer, or even demonstrating the immortality of the soul. Rather, the resurrection/exaltation is a *theological* turning point in which God becomes other than God was before Jesus' death. When God bestows God's name—Lord—on Jesus, this means that God is no longer Lord, Jesus is. All that was true of God as Lord is now true of Jesus the Lord.

Who is this Christ Jesus and what did he do so that his action moved God to name him as Lord? The first half of the Christ hymn (2:6-8) tells the story of one who, though he existed equally with God, did not imagine this existence a thing to be held to himself. He sought instead to extend that form of existence with God to others by becoming a slave to them, bearing in himself their death and condemnation. As a slave, whose body and ultimately whose death, is the ground of his master's freedom, so this one was obedient to us, carrying in his body our death even to the point of his own. This is the one whom God names Lord, and, with this act of naming, God initiated a great confessional movement that will not be complete until all of reality sees reality the way God claims it to be, under the Lordship of the one crucified for others.

The Christ hymn has played a pivotal role in understanding Christ's person and work in the history of theology. It is an appropriate text for the beginning of Holy Week. Unfortunately, it has been widely read as a model for human imitation ("Be obedient to God as Jesus was!") rather than a narrative of human liberation and divine transformation. Countless numbers of oppressed persons have been

exhorted to find their comfort in being like Jesus who was obedient to God (a cipher for oppressive structures). By emphasizing the confessional dimension of the hymn, I hope to have countered this interpretation and indicated that the hymn proclaims to its readers that God's identity was shaped forever in God's own acclamation of Jesus' act of extending freedom to us. Since God names the crucified Jesus as Lord, our freedom to live in the ongoing life of God is safe. Or, in Paul's way of speaking in verse 11, the world's confession of Jesus as Lord brings glory to God as Father.

The Second and Fifth Sundays in Lent: Philippians 3-4—Confessing Jesus as Lord in the present time

Confessing Jesus as Lord is not an activity limited simply to God in the exaltation of Jesus or to all the tongues of creation in the end time. Paul confesses Jesus in the present moment, in the argument of Phil 3:2-4:3. By implication he encourages his readers to do the same. Notice that the following phrases echo the κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός at the climax of the Christ hymn (2:11):

3:8 the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord (Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου)

3:12 because Christ Jesus has made me his own (κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ)

3:20 we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν)

Furthermore, Jesus is referred to as Lord in 3:1 and 4:1, 2. Clearly, Paul wants his readers to understand his argument in chapter three as an instance of the confessing that God began and in which all creation will one day be included.

It is clear in chapter three that Paul agrees with God that Jesus is Lord. Why he agrees is not as apparent. What is at stake? Is there a counterclaim that would falsify the claim that Jesus is Lord? Do the times for confessing ultimate matters occur in the penultimates of everyday life?

In order to see why Paul takes up the mode of confessing we need to pay careful attention to a portion of the argument the theological importance of which the history of interpretation has normally discounted. I refer to Paul's recommendation of Euodia and Syntyche to the church at Philippi in 4:2-3. Sexist assumptions about what women do when they get together (argue) have kept interpreters from seeing the relation between the recommendation in 4:2-3 and the argument of chapter three. When Paul exhorts Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord, he is following a pattern of address reflecting his emphasis on confession that he had established with respect to the entire congregation in 2:2. In the context of the Christ hymn interpreters are not so ready to suggest a background of conflict in the church. Why then should Euodia and Syntyche be assumed to be fighting? The rest of 4:2-3 makes it abundantly clear that Euodia and Syntyche are missionaries just like Paul. The help Paul wants the church to give them is financial support. The church, like the good yoke-mate it is, has already given to Paul, and Paul wants this support extended to these two women.

But precisely there is the difficulty. They are women. In Greco-Roman society, with few exceptions, women were not thought to be public persons. They

lacked the confidence (πεποίθησις) that comes from bearing in their bodies the marks of high status: male, well-born, educated, and so on. Here Paul has detected an issue in response to which it is time to confess Jesus as Lord. If the church would deny roles of leadership to Euodia and Syntyche because they are women, it would be undermining its confession of Jesus as Lord.

Now we can understand why Paul begins chapter 3 with the somewhat vulgar elimination of the male body as a foundation for confidence and leadership. Notice in 3:2-4 the double meaning of “flesh” as it comes in contact with circumcision. Notice as well the status markers (male only) which were once Paul’s but which he now counts as refuse for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Paul goes on to explain this kind of knowing in terms of being “found in Christ” and having a partnership in Christ’s passions, death, and resurrection (3:8-11). Opposed to the confidence generated in the flesh, Paul narrates a way of generating status that has nothing to do with gender but everything to do with the Lordship of Jesus and Jesus’ power to communicate himself, both his suffering and his glory, to Paul through faith. To oppose the leadership of Euodia and Syntyche is to deny the legitimacy of Paul’s leadership. It is also to imply that Jesus is not Lord, is not able to make persons free, and did not die for all.

The place where Paul confesses Jesus as Lord in the present moment most powerfully is 3:20-21. Here also we can see the implications for the question of the public leadership of Euodia and Syntyche, to whom Paul alludes in 3:17 (“observe those who live according to the example you have in us”). Paul writes:

But our commonwealth is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Jesus really is *Lord* and has the power befitting God to cause all things to be subordinated to himself. But it is *Jesus* who is Lord, and for this reason he uses the divine energy for transforming us rather than subordinating us. Most important, it is a transformation of the finite, gendered body into the shape of Jesus’ glorious body. Keeping in mind that “glory” and “public” are closely related concepts in the Greco-Roman world, we can see the usefulness of Paul’s confession for the issue of Euodia and Syntyche. To deny them public roles now is to deny that Jesus the Lord has the power to transform us all into the form of his most public, most glorious, body.

*The Second, Third, and Fourth Sundays after Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 12-13—
Confessing Jesus as Lord and dismantling ecclesiastical hierarchy*

Any casual, non-Christian reader of 1 Corinthians 12 in the ancient world would have felt at home in Paul’s use of the body as a metaphor of the church. That is, if this reader did not pay close attention to Paul’s actual argument. In his recent book, *The Corinthian Body*, Dale Martin has shown how rhetoric about the human body, conceptualized as a composition of hierarchically arranged parts, served the interests of the upper classes in Greco-Roman society. The upper class political

theorists transferred the truth of the foot's subordination to the head to the social body composed of masters and slaves, men and women, rich and poor, and the well born and the vulgar. A quick reading of 1 Corinthians 12 might give the impression that Paul had learned from the elite how to manage the lower classes in the church: include them in the body by making them feel needed but keep them in their place by convincing them they are feet.

Even though Paul does employ the image of the body for the church, he gives Christ's body some unusual twists that preclude its use for legitimating hierarchy. For example, in 12:22-24 Paul subverts the usual pride of place in the human body belonging to the head (which stands in the social body for the well born and educated) and instead points to the great honor attributed to the so-called un-presentable parts (a not so subtle allusion to the poor). Or again, instead of stressing the harmonious working of the parts through recognition of proper function, in 12:24-26 Paul calls his audience's attention to shared suffering, shared glorification, and shared rejoicing of the body parts. The body parts have concern for one another. This is not the language of hierarchy but of friendship (*φιλία*). Paul's use of the body image is innovative; he retains the notion of cohesion but replaces subordination with friendship as the principle for the body's ongoing life.

There must be a metaphysical basis for thinking that body parts could actually relate to one another through shared suffering and mutual concern rather than through subordination. Such a radical rearrangement of the social body calls for a hymn to friendship (a way of praising truth), which Paul gladly supplies in chapter thirteen. The truth of reality is able to be expressed in terms of friendship rather than domination. What is it that lasts? What is really real? What can the body live on? "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (13:13). Paul adopts the confessing mode of speech when he speaks of the future, and the future in Paul's vision is full of mutuality, as the familiar clichés on friendship—the mirror and mutual knowing—testify: "For now we see in a mirror dimly but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (13:12). The future of Christ's body is full of friends, not superiors and inferiors.

Readers will notice that I have substituted the concept of friendship where the English translation has "love" and the Greek has *ἀγάπη*. Far too much has been made in scholarly circles of the difference between these two terms. It is frequently asserted that friendship, since it involves mutuality, could not possibly be a way of speaking about love, especially God's love, which is thought to have a condescending aspect to it: God loves for no reason and with no self-interest. The mutuality implied in 13:12, however, shows that this distinction does not hold and that it is permissible to think of friendship when Paul uses the term *ἀγάπη*. Furthermore, only with the strong sense of mutuality inherent in friendship does chapter thirteen have anything to contribute to the body imagery in chapter 12. Only the mutuality of friendship has the power of dismantling ecclesiastical hierarchy. Condescending love, on the other hand, feeds it.

If we return to the beginning of Paul's discussion of the church as a body (1

Cor 12:1-3), then we realize that the confession of Jesus as Lord will be employed for the dismantling of hierarchy, and chapter thirteen comes as no surprise:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

The chief activity of the Holy Spirit is speaking in the members of Christ's body the truth that Jesus is Lord. Any attempt to use the Spirit's gifts as status markers or vehicles of dominating power, instead of the means to edify the church they are intended to be, pronounces another view: that Jesus is not Lord. ⊕